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ABSTRACT

Learning theories proposed by William Glasser in his text, "Schools without Failure," were implemented in an individualized language instruction program in a small high school in northern Ohio. The theory suggests that the success factor is far more significant than the failure factor in developing learning motivation. The belief that individuals need to be allowed to learn at individualized rates of speed is also implemented in the experimental program. The paper describes how the former audiolingual program evolved into an individualized program based on curriculum materials distributed by the Center for Curriculum Development. Parental concern, student reaction, and program results are discussed. (RL)

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Teaching Foreign Language Without Failure

A thinking and personalized method that works.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
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Introduction:

Mrs. Beverly Wattenmaker and Mrs. Virginia Wilson are Spanish teachers at Kenston High School in northern Ohio. Mrs. Wattenmaker is chairman of the Foreign Language Department which includes, in addition to the two Spanish teachers, two French teachers, Mrs. Phyllis Stoller and Mrs. Joan Lock, and a Russian teacher, Mr. William O'Neil.

The small Kenston High School is a microcosm of American society, with a population of 784 students from well-to-do and poor families of varied cultural and ethnic backgrounds. The school district is a consolidation of long-established farm communities, new and affluent club communities and an aging rural black ghetto.

The heterogenous nature of the school community is a catalytic element that discourages stagnation in educational thinking. Although the community is deeply conservative, it has displayed guarded trust in its school board and administrators, who have shown themselves open to responsible innovation and measured change.

LEARNING FOREIGN LANGUAGE WITHOUT FAILURE: AN APPROACH TO INDIVIDUALIZATION

The Language Department at Kenston High School has long provided area leadership in the development of progressive and more effective means of teaching foreign languages. Kenston was one of the first schools in this area to install a language laboratory, and one of the first to adopt the audio-lingual method. Those students who took college placement tests and other college board exams performed well.

Still, as teachers, we were deeply concerned about the high attrition rate of 40% between the first and second years (the national average is 3%), and we were even more concerned about the lack of enthusiasm, involvement, and real interest shown on the part of the students. Perhaps the two of us, both Spanish teachers, expressed the concern first because our classes were often crowded with students whose only motivation was to "take" the "easiest" language to get into a college.

Because of this concern, we began to listen to remarks made by students: "I don't think I can learn a foreign language"; "The classes are boring"; "I don't memorize well, so I guess learning a foreign language isn't for me"; "What's the point of learning this when we have no place to use it?"

The needs of the students were varied, and we had to admit that we were not really satisfying those needs very successfully. We needed a program that could place the emphasis on each individual, enabling him:

(1) To learn how to think critically and develop problem solving skills;

(2) To develop confidence through successful learning experiences;

(3) To learn to risk being wrong, not to be afraid to try out an idea in the group;

(4) To respond to changing values, learning that what is true and workable in one situation is sometimes inappropriate in another;

(5) To appreciate the abilities of others, discovering the different kinds of help that each student can give the class;

(6) To develop sufficient skill in the language to give him real joy in learning and the feeling of self-worth that comes with accomplishment.

In 1969, as the first step in a new program, we adopted a success philosophy patterned after Dr. William Glasser's suggestions in his book Schools Without Failure: "We must develop schools where children succeed. It is the responsibility of each individual child to work to suc-

ceed in the world, to rise above the handicaps that surround him; equally it is the responsibility of society to provide a school system in which success is not only possible but probable."[1]

Agreeing that the fear of failure actually impedes learning, we decided to stop failing students, that is to, stop recording any mark of failure. As Glasser says, "If you don't learn anything, then nothing has happened to you and you get nothing for it."[2] Instead of traditional grades, A, B, C, D, etc., we decided to award a grade of pass when predetermined standards of mastery were met for each level. There would be no penalty for taking more than a year to complete a level. Whenever a student could not complete a course, he would receive no penalties, and no trace of attendance in the course would be found in his permanent records. Without grades, there was no penalty for working longer to master any unit. Thus, we could allow students to learn at their own pace. We did not have to insist that all students study the same unit at the same time. Our aim was to have each student master each unit before proceeding to the next.

After a brief introductory period, students were liberated from the lock-step class to work with tapes and texts at their own rates of comprehension and mastery. The students were initially excited about the idea, and the majority were glad to be trusted and given the opportunity. Toward the end of the year, however, the students became less enthusiastic. Instead of progressing faster as they learned more, they were progressing more slowly. Lessons were being memorized instead of studied thoughtfully. The classes lacked the intellectual stimulation of a group focussed together on a problem.

By that time, we were convinced that Dr. Glasser was right: "Memorization drives out learning. Thinking is what makes people become motivated because it makes them feel worthwhile. You con't learn a foreign language by memorizing."[3]

But who ever heard of a way to learn a foreign language without memorization? We looked about and discovered that someone had: The Center for Curriculum Development in Philadelphia.[4] Using the audio-visual teaching method carefully researched at St. -Cloud, under the auspices of the French government, The Center for Curriculum Development has developed multi-media materials that can be used to teach students not only to learn a language by thinking, but to actually think in the language. The multi-media program, complemented by a success philosophy, forms the basis of our current program.

The Multi-Media Method

The multi-media methodology consists of four teaching phases: Presentation, Explanation, Repetition, and Transposition. The most important are Explanation and Transposition, or transfer, to new situations.

Presentation requires a few minutes to show a cultural foreign-language situation with a filmstrip accompanied by a taped dialogue. These filmstrips and dialogues are provided by the CCD.

Explanation is a distinctive and individualistic aspect of this methodology, by which the student is led to "explain" to himself rather than "listen" to a teacher's explanation. The teacher askes carefully planned questions that require the student to separate the dialogue sentence into its various structural components, isolate the words which will be meaningful in response to each question, and finally, answer an appropriate question with the entire sentence.

For example, the student (while looking at the filmstrip illustration of the situation) hears a taped dialogue sentence: "Peter's reading in his study."

Teacher's question:	Play tape:	Student's Answer:
Who's this? (points to Peter)	"Peter's reading in his study."	It's Peter.
What's this?	"Peter's reading in his study."	It's a study.
Is it Peter's study?	"Peter's reading in his study."	Yes, it's his study.
Where's Peter?	"Peter's reading in his study."	He's in his study.
What's he doing?	"Peter's reading in his study."	He's reading.
Where's Peter reading?	"Peter's reading in his study."	Peter's reading in his study.

Such an explanation is in sharp contrast to the translation usually given for audio-lingual dialogues:

"Peter's reading in his study." — Pedro está leyendo en su despacho.

or the list of component parts of the traditional method:

Nouns:	Verbs:	Preposition:	Possessive adjectives:
Peter	to be	in	his
study	to read		

Learning through discovery in this manner is essentially indivualized because each student (1) thinks for himself, (2) risks being wrong, (3) experiences the joy of "I know" and (4) learns to work with experimental hypothesis. Let's look at the word "study" for example. Our student has discovered that "study" is a noun; it is Peter's room where he's reading. All of this is true. A week or so later he hears the sentence, "I study with Mary". Recalling the previously acquired linguistic knowledge, does

he think that the new sentence means "I room with Mary"? He must perceive the expanded meaning of the word in its two different structural positions. He discovers that what is true and workable in one situation may not be true in another situation.

This is the kind of relevant learning that must occur in school: coping with change when the old rules don't work in a new situation. It is important that we help students learn how to work out rules.

Repetition, the third phase, provides each student with an opportunity to repeat the dialogue sentence, mimicking the native speaker's intonation, rhythm, pronunciation, and gesture. Students will not willingly repeat something they don't understand, so here again there is real individualization as the student and teacher together identify what is unknown.

Transposition, the final phase, has several parts and is of great importance since "essence of language is the capability of generating and understanding novel utterances."[5]

The first step in creating novel utterances is to lead the students to make some generalizations as to the basic grammatical structure of the language. The students must figure out how the nouns, verbs and all other component parts of the sentence function in relation to each other to convey meanings. For example, the teacher working again with the sentence "Peter's reading in his study" asks various students to take roles to manipulate the component parts of the sentence.

Teacher:	Student:
Who's reading in Peter's study?	Peter's reading in his study.
Ask Peter if he's studying.	Peter, are you studying? --No, I'm reading.
What did he say?	He's reading.
Ask him where he is.	Where are you, Peter? --I'm in my study.
Ask him if he's reading in his study.	Are you reading in your study? --Yes, I'm reading in my study.
What's he doing?	Peter's reading in his study.

Each individual student makes his own generalization of grammatical structure that will enable him to use the language appropriately. He internalizes the grammar by actually making appropriate questions and responses, feeling the significance of the words and structures he is using.

Students learn by doing. They develop a willingness to risk being wrong as they discover that their mistakes help them and the class to learn. They come to laugh gently at each other and themselves when a little grammatical error makes such pleasing nonsense as:

"Where are you from?"

"I am the United States."

He has risked an answer, made a mistake, and been smilingly told that he is not the United States. He corrects himself, "I am from the United States."

This individualized generalization of grammatical concepts differs markedly from the mechanical pattern-drill of audio-lingual programs and even more from the traditional grammar by rules. Students working this way develop real confidence, an attitude of "I can do". Developing confidence in knowing and the willingness to risk being wrong are important individualized values. Furthermore, there is even a kind of built-in self-pacing, as all students do not think through the grammatical concepts at the same time. The student may not have truly understood in the first unit the connection between I'm, you're, he's, yet he could function in the class and he will learn it in Unit 2.

In the second and third steps of transposition, students describe pictures and make résumés of the dialogue story, using compound sentences and generally more stylized language, first oral and then written. From there, it is only a step to reading for understanding.

The final, important step is the transposition of the language learned to the student's own life. The teacher draws on his most creative skills or knowledge of group processes to create opportunities for students to express their own thoughts, feelings and ideas. Although these opportunities may be created through play situations, we have found it more relevant to our students to talk in a circle or very small groups about themselves.

For example: After a first-year class had mastered the verb "to have" in the foreign language, the teacher sat with the class in a circle asking questions such as:

"How many brothers and sisters do you have?", "Do you have any pets?",

"What are they?", etc.

When the questions were well-understood and the responses came more easily, the teacher asked each student to choose as a partner the person he knew least in the class. Each pair of students then conversed for a few minutes in the foreign language, asking the type of question modeled in the circle and remembering his partner's answers. Finally the entire class returned to the circle to hear each person talk about his partner.

Students enjoy sharing personal experiences and feelings. They develop appreciation for each other and each other's abilities. It is not always predictable who will perform best during these "free expression" activities. Many of the so-called "brighter" students have more inhibitions and fear of making mistakes, which may impede them until they gain confidence. So of the students who haven't been so successful in the more traditional classroom, find that their learning abilities are greater than they had imagined and may find themselves teaching the "bright students".

Following these basic steps suggested by the CCD, we find that students learn foreign-language meanings and grammar without any need to speak English.

Implementing the Success Philosophy

1. No Failure. What Do You Do to Pass?

When it comes to evaluation, we are more concerned with what the students know than with what they don't know. Permanent records indicate only the level of language effectively mastered and not the time required to do so. No failure is recorded anywhere. Proficiency is determined by performance, but diagnostic tests are given. Then remedial work is assigned. There is scope here for more individualized work.

Progress is reported after each nine-week period with a pass if quite good, or incomplete if an appropriate level of skill has not been attained. If the mark is incomplete, a narrative report is made with recommendations for further study.

Generally, an incomplete status can be corrected with an hour or so of individual work under the tutelage of a teacher or advanced student, and renewed effort by the student. A course may be repeated if absolutely necessary, but this would not show on the record. Nor would a course dropped be recorded.

This way of recording lets the student know that it is their successes that are important, not their failures.

2. Class Meetings

Doing away with grades is no end in itself. It will not work without a program that involves the students and makes them think. Dr. Glasser taught us to use class meeting to motivate thinking. The students and the teacher sit in a circle or, if there are too many, a circle within a circle, and they talk about what the pupils want to discuss, what's happening in the class, a dilemma of society, or a problem with no answer. During these meetings there are no "right answers". The teacher makes no prescriptive judgements and tries to help the other members of the group avoid making any.

Our class meetings were a key to motivation. Some students were frustrated about the new type of learning situation. Others were afraid they wouldn't work because they weren't given a grade. Others yet felt excited about their first real accomplishments or successes in the high school and were eager to share these feelings with their classmates. These meetings helped to build a sense of identity for individuals within the class. Since much of our program is based on thinking and learning to risk being wrong, it was important to be able to say: "I'm afraid the whole class will think I'm dumb if I say the wrong thing", or "I'm afraid I'm holding up the whole class when I try to think out an answer and so I say 'I don't know' even when I could have figured it out." It was important for some of the students to discuss their impatience with others who learned more slowly. The quicker students had to learn to utilize the time to think creatively, such as making generalizations of the grammatical structure, while yet other students were merely comprehending the meaning.

Some of these meetings were obviously more successful than others. The students were not really very adept at expressing their feelings, and we teachers had very little experience with this type of activity in a learning-teaching situation. Still, the classes seemed to benefit. They seemed to work harder and accomplish more following such meetings.

3. A New Approach to Class Meetings

Near the end of our second year, we discovered some lesson plans and techniques that enabled us to begin more meaningful class meetings in the foreign language. A few of us attended a week-end workshop conducted by Dr. James Carnavale of the Human Development Program,[6] and learned more about group dynamics and some techniques that would help students experience positive feelings about themselves and others in the class. By the end of the year, we were aiming for weekly meetings, of only fifteen minutes duration, devoted to helping students communicate in this meaningful way.

To meet the needs of beginning students, we used kindergarten lesson plans from the course study in Bessell's and Palomares's Methods in Human Development.[7] Sitting with the students in the circle, we suggested that each one think of an object in the room that made him feel good, then name the object and tell how it made him feel. When all who wished to talk had done so, someone recalled what each person had said. This activity was continued the following week by thinking of an object outside of the room. In another session, we thought of something that each student liked to do. This kind of sharing of personal feelings created a situation in which double learning occurred: we learned more about ourselves and others in the group as well as developed linguistic skills. Since the students were expressing personal feelings, their motivation to use language was high indeed.

These meaningful language experiences will become even richer as the skills of the students and teacher develop.

4. How We Made the Change

As we look back, we are amazed that we were able to put in motion a rather revolutionary change without major disruption. Honest, open-discussion meetings aimed at concensus were the key to success in setting up the non-graded program. First, we teachers met to evaluate the success and failure of the strictly-graded audio-lingual program which we had used for twelve years. For three years we have met frequently to study changes that should be made, to decide the directions to be taken, and to learn about and develop our roles. Every teacher was involved in the decision-making as each change was made.

The chairman has tried to avoid making any teacher feel that anything was being imposed on him. Teachers as well as students need to develop feelings of self-worth and importance. Dr. Glasser's success philosophy seemed to us to be the key for an effective change that could be made without disrupting the school structure. We had the support of our principal, Mr. James Liddle, and the tentative approval of the school board to adopt the success philosophy without recording failure or traditional grades.

We then met with the students themselves. Working in a careful way, avoiding prescriptive pronouncements, striving to build up an atmosphere of trust and openness that would make possible the expression of honest feelings, each teacher participated with the students in the circle as facilitator rather than authoritarian leader. The question was: "Can you learn without grades?"

The response from students who had been almost totally motivated by grades for some nine or ten years was quite varied, but the concensus was that they could and would like to do so. By the time that we were ready to talk with parents, most of the students were our staunch allies.

The meeting with parents was astonishing. Four hundred parents and students came, the largest attendance ever at an educational meeting in our small high school. Parents had real concerns about college entrance requirements, class standing, and motivation. We anticipated the questions and had a panel, consisting of a college professor (a parent), our freshman guidance counselor, all the language teachers, and some student volunteers, to present the program and address the concerns. We had prepared well and could give some tentative answers: Foreign language was removed from the competition for class standing; students were to be motivated by success and involvement; colleges were mostly favorable or tolerant. After the more general questions were answered, the participants were divided into groups with each teacher, his students and their parents for discussion of specific questions. The students begged for the opportunity to learn responsibly without having the penalty of failure or poor grades held over them. It was gratifying to see parents losing their fears and becoming more open to change as they heard the students. The students felt good about being heard by their parents and teachers. The success of that meeting is still reflected in parental approval of our program.

During the first year of working without grades, we continued to use our existing audio-lingual curriculum. Teachers felt varying degrees of success. We shared our feelings of disappointment and frustration and were motivated to find better materials that would challenge and involve students. The department chairman attended a CCD seminar in Philadelphia to learn about their multi-media program. She returned, excited about its possibilities, and arranged for two more teachers to attend such seminars to evaluate thoroughly the method and materials.

During that first summer, two of us participated in the two-week intensive workshop conducted by CCD to train teachers in the methodology. Upon our return, the other teachers requested that we set up training sessions for them before the opening of school in September. Each teacher wrote out detailed lesson plans for the various phases of the teaching program. We gave each other "shock classes", that is, demonstration classes with teachers taking the part of students in a new language. This is a valuable experience for both the demonstration teacher and the teachers in the role of students. (We teachers forget how the learning of a new language feels - the frustration of confusion or the excitement of success.)

The enthusiasm and dedication of our department to master the method was vital. The interpersonal relationship among teachers learning together, observing and criticising each other's classes, has been a cohesive factor.

Before each department meeting, we observed at least one other class. These visitations were always carried out in the spirit of helpfulness. We found that we learned a great deal when the class observed was not perfect. The same thing we asked our students to do, we did ourselves. We risked making mistakes, were involved, appreciated each other's abilities and weaknesses, and most of all we were thinking and learning.

5. Measurable Results

(1) Our students are speaking their target languages better than ever before. We teachers and visitors to the classes are impressed by their skill. We have had a steady stream of visitors: high-school teachers from a wide area, college students studying methods, native speakers and even some parents. Enthusiastic approval is evident. Native visitors are surprised and delighted to be able to converse in their own tongue with students.

(2) Although the high school faculty voted to abolish language requirements, with the unanimous approval of the language department, our enrollment increased by 10%, after the first year of the CCD program.

(3) We noticed, with amazement, that discipline problems almost disappeared and recalled that Dr. Glasser said: "You've got to quit hurting the kids and they will quit hurting you back."

6. Summary

We don't claim to have found the perfect solutions for teaching foreign languages in high school. We can only share with you some of the ideas that seem to be working.

Children have changed with the times. They want to be involved with relevant things. Our changing values in society require changing our ideas of teaching. Since students are concerned with their role in life, we must become involved with the students enough to reinforce their roles. Class meetings have proven to be one way of helping students build up their self-image and thus their ability to learn. The stimulating multi-media program of CCD, where the students learn to think and accomplish, has helped tremendously to make students feel successful and, thus, willing to work harder. The Human Development Program has given us a vehicle to make talking between students a more meaningful experience and thus develop even more of a desire to communicate.

On the whole, our success philosophy that stresses what students know and keeps the options open for more learning is what we think school today should be.

7. Postscript

At the end of the year, we asked the parents for feedback. We sent questionnaires to about two hundred. Most parents responded quite positively now that the program is in operation. Forty answered us with approval, many enthusiastically. Four wrote their objection to the success philosophy which they have opposed from the beginning, believing that only grades motivate students. (The children of those four parents happen to be learning well.) Some comments were:

"Your program has reduced some of the pressures. Without the necessity for competing for grades, there seems to be a better climate for learning."

"My daughter is more relaxed and shows more enthusiasm and greater incentive without the pressure of grades."

"The students seem happy to prove to themselves that they can do it."

Students were also questioned specifically and their answers indicated how they felt about learning this way.

"Without grades I worry less and accomplish more. I can think without getting all jumbled up."

"It gives you more of a chance to learn from mistakes and not have to worry about failing from it."

"You don't know your grade so you have to work your best all the time."

"I don't feel pressured and when I'm not pressured, I can do better."

We think we can all do better!

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